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Always Missing

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Seven love stories: *Now, Voyager* (Irving Rapper, 1942), *Casablanca* (Michael Curtiz, 1942), *There's Always Tomorrow* (Douglas Sirk, 1956), *Strangers When We Meet* (Richard Quine, 1960), *Splendor in the Grass* (Elia Kazan, 1961), *Dr. Zhivago* (David Lean, 1965), and *The Way We Were* (Sydney Pollack, 1973). In each film, a woman and a man do not end up together. These star-crossed couples face obstacles within the tumult of modernity, swept up by the power of eros. There are chance meetings—*Now, Voyager*; *Strangers When We Meet*; *Dr. Zhivago*—and reunions—*Casablanca*; *There's Always Tomorrow*—and, of course, separations, as in *Splendor in the Grass* and *The Way We Were*. The characters are constantly arriving and departing, by carriage, train, car, plane, and ship. Amid these dislocations, against a backdrop of war and its shadows, private worlds are made, inside of which two become one. Love is expressed in caresses, embraces, kisses, and looks, realized in both tenderness and passion.

Creator's statement

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Women's desire, moreover, is unmistakable. True longing is visible in *Dr. Zhivago* when Lara (Julie Christie) is literally pulled away from Yuri (Omar Sharif), equaling the intensity of her lust upon their initial encounter on a Moscow streetcar. In *There's Always Tomorrow*, Norma's (Barbara Stanwyck) delight upon seeing Clifford (Fred MacMurray) is, somehow magically, like a sunrise in evening. Behold the purposeful, confident gaze Katie (Barbra Streisand) uses in *The Way We Were*, a film centered on her physical attraction to Hubbell (Robert Redford), who is clearly an object of visual fascination. The films are shaped by female agency. There's a telling, distinctive commonality to many of these ill-fated romances—women leaving men.[1]

[1] The casting of many of these films is notable. In a 1972 interview, the critic Pauline Kael discusses the prominence of capable, self-reliant Hollywood actresses in prior periods, citing Bette Davis and Barbara Stanwyck, both of whom appear in "Always Missing." For Kael, the former was "never any man's inferior." Kael laments that "the '50s and '60s were very bad for women on the screen," but adds that "we do have Streisand, who has a great comedy spark and is very independent, very strong." Leo Lerman, "Pauline Kael Talks about Violence, Sex, Eroticism and Women & Men in

"Always Missing" opens with such an event. In an iconic shot from the dénouement of *Casablanca*, Ilsa (Ingrid Bergman) parts from Rick (Humphrey Bogart). They will, however, "always have Paris." The city where they meet and fall in love is a shared memory which they will possess forever. In recollecting their time together, Ilsa and Rick will themselves be possessed by remembrance. "Always Missing" concludes with a series of moments in which eyes touch for the first time.[2] Georges Poulet describes initial meetings as a "lighting flash," adding that "[t]his *first sight* is situated outside of time, in an instantaneousness which is an absolute beginning: a moment when something *is* which before was not."[3] Something not forgotten.

Ending with beginnings and beginning with endings, "Always Missing"'s reverse order presents each film linearly through crosscutting. That is, the scenes follow the films' respective plots.[4] There are two exceptions to the overall uniformity of this "alternating syntagma": (1) with *Now, Voyager* there is a direct cut from Paul, pen in hand, to a point earlier in the film, where he shares a cigarette with Charlotte; and (2) the *Casablanca* flashback to Ilsa and Rick's time in Paris, as their eyes meet while taking a drive.[5] Both exceptions emphasize the relationship between imagination and love, the importance of the daydream. The recurrent shift from film to film is momentarily suspended in the *Now, Voyager* variation. While Charlotte is obviously on Paul's mind as he writes the letter, the juxtaposition suggests he's thinking about *this* specific moment, so that the airport scene is transformed, videographically, into an analepsis. And the final image is from an actual memory-scene from *Casablanca*, depicting the early stages of Ilsa and Rick's romance.

This final image is followed by an epilogic quotation from Jacques Lacan's eleventh seminar of 1964, where he remarks:

> From the outset, we see, in the dialectic of the eye and the gaze, that there is no coincidence, but, on the contrary, a lure. When, in love, I solicit a look, what is profoundly unsatisfying and always missing is that—*You never look at me from the place from which I see you*.[6]

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the Movies," in Will Brantley (ed.), *Conversations with Pauline Kael*, 39.

[2] "Always Missing" combines literal beginnings (*Now, Voyager; Strangers When We Meet*; and *Dr. Zhivago*) and literal endings (*Casablanca*, *The Way We Were*, and *Strangers When We Meet*) with beginnings and endings which are not strictly speaking "absolute," such as Norma and Clifford's reunion, after many years apart, in *There's Always Tomorrow* and Lara and Yuri's farewell in *Dr. Zhivago*.

[3] Georges Poulet, *Studies in Human Time*, (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1956), 131–132 (emphasis in original).

[4] Here, "plots" denotes the arrangement of narrative events. See Seymour Chatman, *Story and Discourse*, (Cornell University Press, 1980), 43–44.

[5] See Christian Metz, *Film Language*, (University of Chicago Press, 1990), 102–104.

[6] Jacques Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* (W. W. Norton & Company, 1998), 102–103.

The passage is intended to evoke "suture," a psychoanalytical film theory concept first developed by Jean-Pierre Oudart through an analysis of *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* (Robert Bresson, 1962).[7] According to Oudart, the back and forth of shot/reverse shot editing—as a form of "stitching"—cathects the spectator to the diegesis through the continual displacement of (and substitution for) a made-up figure he terms the "Absent One," who haunts a shot's "absent field."[8] A key distinction for Oudart is between the "filmic" and the "symbolic." The former places the film's spectator under a spell of immediacy, which is maintained through suture. Robert Bresson is praised for reflexively baring the cinema's "symbolic dimension" in *Procès de Jeanne d'Arc* through his idiosyncratic cuts. Oudart claims that "in articulating the conditions and the limits of its signifying power, the cinema is also speaking of eroticism."[9] By revealing the workings of continuity editing, Bresson hence produces a different kind of spectatorial pleasure.

"Always Missing" inverts this emphasis. As a videographic work, it does foreground cinema's familiar mechanisms of identification, especially conventional shot/reverse shot patterns. Yet crucially, it reaffirms the primacy of the so-called "filmic field," which is "dilated by the spectator's reverie."[10] It does so by concentrating on libidinal energy and its dissipation: on yearning, on elation, on heartbreak. Or, more precisely, it does so by concentrating those experiences so that they shape "Always Missing," which is propelled by intense feeling. In melodrama, there are no limits, as powerful emotions are difficult—perhaps impossible—to articulate. The "eroticism" can thus be found not in the structuring crisscrossing parallelism, but directly in images of romantic love.

The two *Casablanca* shots which bookend "Always Missing" are, notably, not an instance of "suture," though they do contain eyelines. In the former, the camera is positioned behind Rick, who is behind Ilsa, with neither expression visible, whilst in the latter the camera faces both characters, framing them in a two-shot. Here, Oudart's "filmic field" has a beautiful glow as Ilsa and Rick take each other in, a moment where arguably the "Absent One" is not there. "We'll always have Paris," they say. But in that flashback, it should be stressed, there is no city, it is only these two people together.[11] When you look into the eyes of the one you love and they look into yours, there is nothing but that. Everything else is always missing.

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[7] Jean-Pierre Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," *Screen* (1977), 35–47.

[8] For an explication of subsequent elaborations on the concept, by theorists such as Daniel Dayan and Stephen Heath, see Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (Oxford University Press, 1983), 201–215.

[9] Oudart, "Cinema and Suture," 46.

[10] Ibid, 41.

[11] Their mutual absorption is underscored by the use of rear projection, with the urban backdrop dissolving into a country road, intensifying the scene's phantasy-like characteristics.

Biography

Alexander Greenhough teaches in the Program in Writing and Rhetoric at Stanford University. His videographic criticism has also appeared in the *TV Dictionary*, *In Media Res*, and *MAST: The Journal of Media Art Study and Theory.*

Review by Robyn Warhol, The Ohio State University

Visually beautiful and affectively absorbing, "Always Missing" reorganizes materials from seven classic Hollywood romances where the hero and heroine do not end up together. In their original forms, these dystopic romance plots achieve closure through some variation on self-sacrifice, some reason why one lover or the other must decide to walk away from the affair because that would be better for people connected to the other lover, or for the war effort, or maybe just for the sake of the genre's melodramatic imperative. "Always Missing" un-closes the films by "beginning with the films' endings and ending with the films' beginnings," as creator Alexander Greenhough's abstract puts it.

The reverse-chronological structure recalls Harold Pinter's devastating 1978 play, *Betrayal*. That play presents nine scenes spanning a seven-year extramarital affair between a woman and her husband's best friend, the first scene set two years after the affair is discovered and the ninth scene set before it has begun, when the marriage and the friendships are still intact. To watch the play is to enact extreme dramatic irony, as the audience knows during each scene all the misery that is to come after that moment in story-time. The trusting affection that dominates the ninth scene is almost unbearable to watch in the knowledge of where it will lead.

"Always Missing" goes for a similar effect, presenting the agonized moments of loss before the joyous moments of togetherness in each of the seven films. It is not strictly true that the video begins with the films' endings and ends with the films' beginnings, for a reason less subtle than the few analeptic exceptions Greenhough identifies in his creator's statement. The films themselves are, of course, full of flashbacks, daydreams, and memory scenes, organized into discourse-time, that is, the order in which they are presented by the film, which is seldom strictly chronological. Each of the romances has its own story-time, the beginning, middle, and end of the events being presented. What Greenhough has done is to detach the story-time from the discourse-time, and to reorganize not the beginnings and ends of the films, but rather the beginnings and ends of the romances. By doing so, he has created a piece that focuses even more viscerally on the dynamics of desire, delight, and longing than the original films do.

This raises an ontological question about the project. Who are the Ilsa and Rick, the Lara and Yuri, the Katie and Hubbell of "Always Missing"? The video presents actors'

highly effective performances of desiring looks, decontextualizing them in such a way as to detach them from the characterizations in their original films. We are left with stunning representations of what desire looks like in Hollywood film and we are reminded of how familiar that look has become within filmic conventions. As actors in films that were to become classics, the performers are composing the visual vocabulary of desire and longing. To be sure, the figures in these clips are not characters, much less real people.

To cite Lacan's reflection that "You never look at me from the place from which I see you" is perhaps to conflate a psychoanalytic insight about actual people with evidence not of human psychology but of filmic convention. Indeed, one is led to wonder whether Lacan's intuitions about desire—one can hardly call them deductions—might have been at least partly shaped by his own spectatorship of classic films. Decades of film theory have shown how well Lacan can account for desire on the screen and in the viewer. But no lover has ever looked at me as Bogart and Redford look at Bergman and Streisand. If I base my own expectations of desire on what I have experienced through classic films, I am doomed to disappointment, even without the complications of the gaze that Lacan is pointing to. Lacan's description pertains perfectly to the cinematic representation of desire, which is not at all the same thing as desire itself. Greenhough's video seems to raise these issues, but his creators' statement could more directly address them.

"Always Missing" is highly pleasurable to watch. The slow motion is a gorgeous effect, emphasizing not just the actors' flawless performances of longing, grief, and desire but also the brilliant crosscutting between the two lovers and the beautiful framing of each emotional moment. The ethereal synthesized soundtrack, called "Perfect Fantasy," is evidently meant to evoke a dream state. I found it off-putting because it's not exactly music. I suppose watching the video shouldn't be entirely pleasurable because the scenes themselves are so full of pain. And if the soundtrack is meant to be dreamlike, that could suggest that all this desire, longing, and sorrow are themselves as evanescent as dreams—after all, desire this intense has only a tenuous connection to reality and will pass away, for the audience and even for the characters (as the discourse-end of *Casablanca* implies). I would have preferred some passionate piece of classical music that is not associated with any of the seven films (the slow movement from a symphony by Brahms or Dvořák, maybe, or the two-pianos version of one of the Liebeslieder Waltzes) but I can see how the literal Romanticism of such an accompaniment might come off as a cliché. If the intention is to disrupt the romanticness of the scenes, then the present soundtrack certainly achieves that.

A smaller point, which I'm sure the artist took into consideration in revising his artist statement: I took exception to Greenough's description of *The Way We Were* in his original statement as "a film centered on [Katie's] physical attraction to Hubbell,

who is clearly an object of visual fascination." Judging by the clips in "Always Missing" alone, Barbra Streisand's Katie is every bit as much an object of visual fascination as Robert Redford's Hubbell, and Redford's looks at Streisand are just as desiring as are her looks at him. The plot of the film itself does not, I think, skew more towards her physical desire for him than his for her. To make the comment is, I believe, to disparage Streisand's appearance unfairly. Casting the most beautiful Hollywood actor of his time against the least conventionally attractive actress was a bold move. But whether they have happy endings or sad ones, the whole point of romance movies starring someone like Streisand or, say, Liza Minelli is to show that Hollywood can make even a plain woman gorgeous, glamorous, and desirable. Greenhough didn't need to slight Streisand to make his important observation about the degree of agency assigned to women in these films.

The title, "Always Missing," is perfect. The final line of Greenhough's statement only begins to explain the many resonances of his title. Not only is everything else but the lover's gaze always missing in the moment of looking at each other, but in these failed romance plots the two lovers are always missing each other, either in the sense of wishing to be with them while they are apart or in the sense of mistiming, the missed opportunities that end in their final separation.

Review by Barbara Zecchi, University of Massachusetts Amherst

El ojo que ves,
no es ojo porque tú lo veas,
es ojo porque te ve."
(The eye that you see,
it's not an eye because you see it,
it's an eye because it sees you.)
—Antonio Machado

A simple search shows that the word "hypnotic" is used frequently by reviewers of *[in] Transition*. Evidently, we are often captivated by the spell of the video essay, and its mesmerizing "effects and affects" (to borrow Catherine Grant's pun, 2016). Alexander Greenhough's stunning "Always Missing" had that impact on me. Its images, rhythm, and Arcticology's music elicited intense emotions. It was indeed hypnotic.

Yet, paradoxically, "Always Missing" pursues an opposing objective—a strategy that I would describe, for lack of better terms, as a form of "hypnotic dehypnotization." The video essay uses hypnotic techniques to create an experience that challenges the hypnotic spell, in order to lead the viewer to a state of awareness and self-reflection. However, the

desired outcome remains intentionally elusive. For Greenhough, "when you look into the eyes of the one you love and they look into yours," as happens with the characters of his selection of seven films, "everything else is always missing": the hypnotic effect persists.

Through a skillful juxtaposition of clips that correspond to some of the most iconic ill-fated heterosexual love stories of Hollywood cinema, presented in an alluring slow motion, and rearranged in reverse diegetic order, Greenhough elaborates on Oudart's concept of "suture." Placing ending before beginnings, and farewells before first encounters, the video essay creates a new temporality that disorients the viewer's expectations and invites them to reconsider the viewer-character relationship. Greenhough's goal is to demonstrate that in melodrama, even when the suture is "unsutured," the viewer's gaze remains fixated on the characters' eyes.

In another twist, a quote by Lacan included at the end of the video essay ("You never look at me from the place from which I see you") highlights the fundamental asymmetry in how we see others. There is always something that remains hidden or inaccessible, as we can never fully bridge the gap between our own perspective and the other person's.

However, Greenhough argues, this is not the case of these films. In his video essay, lovers exchange their last look before being separated, only to be reunited when they first look at each other. This "estrangement" effect is intentionally created, yet we remain hypnotized by the allure of these ill-fated love stories and by the lovers' eyes.

So, what is always missing? Unlike for Lacan, for Alexander Greenhough, it is not the other person's gaze. From a feminist point of view, however, we should question whether these female characters truly control their own gaze and (hetero)sexual desire. For me, what is always missing is the mechanical look of the camera and the coercive gaze of the law that attribute "to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation" (Kaja Silverman, 1983: 232). Thus, in my opinion, what remains absent is a gender-aware mechanism that exposes the hypnotic effects of the camera and the law, and how they operate to shape and limit women's agency and desire. And this might well be what Greenhough calls the "everything else": the elusive but crucial element that escapes our attention when we become hypnotized by the alluring imagery of Hollywood's iconic love stories.

References

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